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SUBJECT: SAMARRA RECONSTRUCTION EXTENDS BEYOND GOLDEN MOSQUE

REF: BAGHDAD 2645

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg D'Elia for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Salah ad-Din reporting cable.

Summary

¶11. (C) Reconstruction of the Al-Askari Mosque continues to advance. The Shi'a Mosque recently opened to local citizens for the first time since the terrorist bombing in February 2006. Additionally, reconstruction efforts are now expanding more noticeably beyond the Mosque with an increased focus on the city. City residents appreciate that the local government is making a credible effort to improve their lives, but still do not believe their needs are being met. Visits by high-level officials underline GoI interest in the rebuilding process, which has played a central role in securing needed reconstruction resources. Significant obstacles include the challenge of retaining the support of the mostly Sunni city residents, and dealing with a lack of coordination between the Salah-ad-Din (SaD) provincial government, the Samarra's Mayor's office, and the GoI. End summary.

Rebuilding Al-Askari Mosque

¶12. (C) Progress continues to be made on reconstruction of the Al-Askari Mosque, which suffered the destruction of its golden dome in the February 2006 bombings, and the collapse of its remaining golden minarets in a June 2007 attack. GoI and UNESCO completed site and engineering studies in May, and are now in the process of removing rubble, preparing the site, and finalizing drawings. Some ancillary construction has started, but no company has been selected yet to take on the primary reconstruction efforts, which will take up to five years. Samarra residents continue to be incorporated into the reconstruction effort. Over the past 2-3 months approximately 150 Samarrans have rotated through the workforce of rubble-removal teams inside the Mosque compound.

The teams are made up of 60-75 workers from cities throughout Iraq and rotated bi-weekly through the site.

¶13. (C) On Wednesday, August 6, the Mosque was opened to local citizens for the first time since the February 2006 terrorist bombing. The decision to open the Mosque for a day was apparently made by MG Rasheed, Commander of the Samarra Operations Center, in conjunction with Suhaib Najam Dawood, a local consultant to UNESCO on reconstruction efforts. Based on comments from local citizens, the event helped give Samarrans more confidence that the project is proceeding as planned. It also helped by clearing away suspicions held by many Samarrans about what is happening inside the T-wall enclosure that surrounds the Mosque -- in particular, dispelling a common rumor among Samarrans that Iran is directly involved in the rebuilding of the Mosque. Throughout the event, crowds were orderly and the police and security forces were helpful. The only complaint was that

the designated route to the Mosque from the south seemed unnecessarily long. Local officials intend to repeat the open house in the coming months.

Reconstruction efforts outside the Mosque

¶ 14. (C) Reconstruction efforts have begun to expand more noticeably outside the Mosque with an increased focus on the city and residents of Samarra. Two repaired and refurbished water delivery trucks, funded by QRF, made their first rounds in neighborhoods that have no water service. The trucks will offer 500 liters of water to each dwelling on a rotating schedule and have the capability of pumping water to rooftop tanks. A third truck is being repaired with a combination of QRF and municipal money. Also of note is a business compensation program with GoI funding, aiming to help local businesses recover some of the losses suffered from the bombing and associated kinetic operations. Applications for compensation were completed by local businessmen two weeks ago and are now awaiting approval by the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Finance. Other improvements outside the Mosque include a water treatment project which will be put out for bid next week, and the refurbishment and expansion of the General Hospital which will follow in 2-3 weeks (both rely on donor funding through the UNDP).

¶ 15. (C) GoI has also weighed in to expedite reconstruction efforts outside of the Mosque. Frustrated by the slow pace of provincial action, the Ministry of Finance withdrew 11 million USD that had been granted to the SaD provincial

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government by GoI for Samarra reconstruction. The 11 million was part of a larger 25 million USD program for Samarra reconstruction. The Ministry of Municipalities apparently now holds the money that was formerly in control of the province and has redirected the funds toward the construction of five new municipal buildings in the provincial capital. Designs for the buildings are complete and bids should be awarded following a 2-3 month process. A second 25 million USD for Samarra city projects was announced by the Prime Minister earlier this month, and a possible third tranche of 25 million has been mentioned to the Mayor and PRT Samarra by senior GoI officials.

The importance of Samarra

¶ 16. (C) The importance of reconstruction efforts outside the Mosque have been underlined by the recent visits of several high-level GoI officials to Samarra. During his July visit, city officials and the Deputy Governor made the case to Hak Al-Hakim, GoI Chairman of the Supreme Council for Reconstruction, that Samarra should receive reconstruction funds for damage incurred during kinetic operations in the same way that Basra, Mosul and Sadr City have been compensated (those cities received 100 million USD each for reconstruction projects). Hak promised to convey this request to the Prime Minister. Funding to Samarra by the PM's office subsequently increased.

¶ 17. (C) Another high-level visit occurred on August 16 when Dr. Mowaffak Al-Rubaie, Iraq's National Security Advisor, visited Samarra to get an update on security from MG Rasheed.

The PRT Satellite Lead took part in the visit by briefing Rubaie and his staff on the overall progress in the city. Rubaie opened the discussion by expressing his pleasure that the problems facing Samarra now are primarily economy-, infrastructure-, and investment-related rather than security problems. He noted with satisfaction that the appointment of MG Rasheed had been controversial within the GoI but that there is now widespread agreement that he was the right person for the job. Rubaie also shared his great interest in the Golden Mosque and the potential for major religious

tourism to the city (see reftel). PRT Lead also outlined to the Advisor Samarra's potential for archeological tourism. Other topics discussed included the status of various funding projects and the potential for additional economic stimulus from the GoI. Rubaie agreed that capital projects should be labor intensive and locally contracted and said he will support speeding up the process of budget implementation as a matter of national security.

Samarra Planning Commission

¶8. (C) Another sign of progress in the rebuilding effort is the establishment of the Samarra Planning Commission. The concept of the Commission was introduced by the PRT and caught the imagination of city officials. It was then introduced at Provincial and GoI levels and was formally established at the Istanbul Conference on the Development of Samarra that took place July 16-20. The Commission's focus is on developing a long-term vision for the city. The UNDP agreed to provide funding to complete a Samarra Development Plan, and work is underway on a four-year development plan which is expected to be finished by the end of 2008. The plan will include aspirational expansions of basic services such as more water plants and mobile power plants, and expansion of support for youth and sports activities, and women's social and business needs.

¶9. (C) Comment: Despite the additional efforts to improve the quality of life for the residents of the city, Samarrans -- particularly the Sunni majority -- will be unlikely to adopt a positive attitude towards the government until multiple major building projects are underway in the city. Samarra's security is considerably better than it was six months ago, which will facilitate beginning of several planned projects within the year. GoI officials have shown a strong interest in supporting the reconstruction effort; however, the lack of coordination between the City Council and the Provincial Council continues to hold back progress. This lack of cooperation is a looming obstacle to future progress since all 2009 projects for Samarra must be approved by the SaD Provincial Council before they can be included in the 2009 provincial budget which is due on September 14, ¶2008. In private conversations with PRT members, Hak confided that he believes the lack of cooperation across the levels of SaD government and with the GoI is a problem that will not be resolved until after elections are held, and new provincial officials take office. End comment.

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